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Culture Debate
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The America with streets paved of gold was the seed that planted, and cultivated, has grown into the modern day "American Dream." Whether monster or magi, the notion of "America" has reached a global scale, touching developed and developing nations alike—no discrimination here, the western world and American culture is presented to all peoples no matter of race, religion, income, or location. Manifesting itself on all scales, "American" can describe anything from a political structure, to business practice, to personal values and attitudes, all the way down to a style of clothes and a type of cheese. No matter where in the world you go, one this is sure, that your American Passport will no doubt stir up feelings, and get a reaction.

In her 2010 Ted Talk, Naomi Klein underlines the issues of American "sustainability" as it originates with the desire to progress, the desire for more, to push limits, and to risk it all. Taking particular focus on, yes, the resource use by the United States, but in particular attacks the attitude behind the practices. Titled "Addicted to Risk" Klein asserts that Americans are trained to take big risks, get big rewards, and thus develop qualities of greed and hubris that perpetuate risky behavior, creating a vicious cycle of risk and reward with no exit strategy in case of failure. Showing images of the BP oil geyser, she discusses how technology isn't controlling nature anymore. After years of "slapping mother nature in the face" nature is fighting back and every so often, technology falls short. She wraps up her discussion lamenting that Americans so frequently are willing to gamble with that which is irreplaceable, and that this is how civilizations commit suicide "by pressing on the accelerator at the exact moment that they should be pressing the break."

Klein proposes a tight argument for why American culture is ecologically unsustainable in regards to resource exploitation, honing in on the oil industry. She acknowledges the fact that historically, technology has been able to save us from impending doom, but is quick to dismiss the fact that technologies are getting better and new technologies are being developed every day. So focused on painting technology as the villain, she fails to acknowledge technologies role as a viable solution. Certainly, it is not being implied that technology will be the great panacea, but rather that technology, innovation, and progress is every bit as American as big oil, or the national parks system. Berating the general lack of a fear of failure within the large corporate structure, she is careful to say that individual confidence is not a bad thing. However, Klein fails to acknowledge the fact that these corporations she chides for their apparent lack of fear, is made up of the same individuals that she permits to push limits. An attack on technology requires one to dismiss the years of help and progress that technology has permitted us, for example, the great strides being made in

solar panels, and that is not a last ditch attempt in the 11th hour, but instead a consistent flow of research design and progress over several decades.

In November 1979, Ronald Reagan issued his Official Announcement of Candidacy for President. In the interest of preaching longevity, he begins the speech with positive statements about Americans "living in anticipation of the future because [he] knows it will be a great place." The announcement oozes with optimism on the future of America citing past successes, personifying the nation as a "living, breathing presence, unimpressed by what others say is possible, proud of its own success..." The announcement continues on, commending Americans for the success of their country and that these successes have been earned through diligent hard work and sacrifices along the way. The argument for sustainability is questioned because why should the successful feel guilty for being successful, and for reaping the rewards of their work? Success is the proof of American sustainability; Reagan closes his address with an indefinite statement of progress, "I believe that you and I together can keep this rendezvous with destiny."

Much of what Reagan said as positive can now, with the grace of time, be turned in favor of American unsustainability. Written thirty-five years ago, we now have much of the science and data collected to prove many of Reagan's statements as incorrect. He speaks of America personified as a child, with Americans as the proud parent; maintaining his analogy, this hubris blinds Americans to the faults and shortcomings of their wonderful infant country. Simultaneously, by personifying the nation, it removes responsibility from the individual, who is in fact the reality of the nation. The excessive optimism and back-patting motif of his speech lives an unsettling feeling of half-truths and propaganda for the time being. Now, retrospectively, there are the last three-decades of documentation by independent and credible sources worldwide to document the ecological unsustainability of the first world that Reagan dismisses so casually as "false estimates by unknown, unidentifiable experts who rewrite modern history..." Today, in the globalized world, it is no longer acceptable for the rich and successful to reap the benefits of past successes that are, as a result, no longer available to their social counter parts. No longer can we accept that a "higher standard of living has been earned" and that those without it are doomed to remain subservient to their hegemonic "Other."

When dealing with a sustainability issue as intangible as culture, it becomes imperative to discuss this within a quantifiable framework, in the hopes of generating a truly objective critique of sustainability and culture. For this application, American culture will be qualified and quantified to the "American Dream" and the desire for progress, the desire for more, and the desire to advance, to be the biggest and to be the best. This take on cultural sustainability diverts from the super-sized problems of America's unsustainable habits, and instead analyzes American unsustainability on a personal level with the manufactured "American Dream" as aspirations for individuality

(personal space), leisure (a personal vehicle), and success (financial security and material things).

Personal space manifests itself as the American Dream of the single family home, and a yard with a white picket fence; suburbia. Within the most fundamental of critiques, suburban sprawl requires space. The ideal allocates a 'comfortable' amount of elbow room to every family and home. In a world of manifest destiny and the Wild West, suburbia was very real, and very possible (Don't believe me? Google-map Phoenix, Arizona). In today's world of population explosion, mass urbanization, and "from-sea-to-crowded-sea" we are running out of space. Simple math can—and does—tell us that not every group of cohabitants can occupy that same amount of "comfortable" space without us running out of space. Forget including the amount of space required in addition to living space in order to provide power and water to, remove waste from, and nutritionally sustain that same conglomerate. Even with the United States' population growth at effectively zero, the footprint of the nation is not big enough to deliver on this ideal of personal space.

Leisure is time to be enjoyed; as a production based society, America has been trained to occupy their leisure time doing something that is pleasurable to the subject in question. And so began domestic tourism, and the single family car, and the gas tank, and big oil. The film, The End of Suburbia lays out the sustainability issues with suburbia in regards to the cheap oil boom of the 1970s. Oil and suburbia exploded at the same time as the electric car fell out of relevancy in American history. In addition to inefficiently using oil to transport individuals and small groups to their leisure destinations, suburbia adds obsolescence to public transportation by removing the home from the mass transportation network, further encouraging a car of one's own.

Again, referencing The End of Suburbia, the film establishes the "purchasing phase" of life that young adults enter after getting married, buying a home, a car, and starting a family. The Purchasing phase is a point in life where the immaterial values of love, companionship, family have been obtained and a collection of objects and things begin to measure success, happiness, love and gratitude. These objects thus draw in the unsustainable cycle of American consumerism and capitalist priorities into the argument of culture. These objects break, are disposed of, replaced with the newest, latest versions.

Ultimately the argument at hand is one of values. The term "culture" originated in Ancient Rome from "cultura animi," the cultivation of the soul. American culture has brought that meaning full circle in a skewed value system of objects and things to satisfy a desire; to satisfy the soul. Thus, the inherent problem is yes, that American Culture is unsustainable. American culture is unsustainable because the "culture" of America has become trapped within things, objects, stuff; things, objects, stuff that we throw away. By putting so much value in the material, we are throwing our culture away...does American culture reside in the landfill?

Throughout history, America has served as a sort of Holy Grail for many; an example of that which to aspire to, a point of comparison in order to measure success, happiness, progress. In more recent time the world seems to have taken a step back and reflect upon the American lifestyle and it has come under criticism. Particularly in regards to consumption and climate change, America tends to find itself in the hot seat of over consumption, excess waste, while taking a minor role in addressing the problem on a global scale. Involved in multiple global initiatives to slow human consumption, and reduce the carbon footprint, rarely is the lens turned inward to really critique the American mentality and the system that feeds into it. Culture and capitalism have become mutually dependent within all things which are "American." Is this reality sustainable? It has been thus far. The question now is if we are finding ourselves in a bubble of reactive solutions that allows American culture to hop from unsustainable practice to unsustainable practice in a web of unsustainability that has become dangerously sustainable through design and innovation? Or are we finding ourselves within a downward spiral that continues until the bottom is reached, and collapse imminent.